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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews the selection and use of the Dartmouth Intensive Language Model at Western Maryland College. The purpose was to produce a student who could read, understand, speak, and write French easily enough to make a foreign language major attractive and less formidable. The program proposed a three-semester sequence of intensive French courses to replace the traditional four-semester sequence of elementary and intermediate French. Student responses to the courses revealed favorable evaluations of the format. The course also guided apprentice teachers in the improvement of language skills. This improvement was due also to a presemester teacher workshop where pedagogical techniques were explored. (JK)

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To Speak or not to Speak:

Promoting the Dartmouth Model at a Small Private College

Western Maryland College seems shamelessly to defy its name. Neither is it located in western Maryland, nor is it a public institution. It is a private liberal arts college lying comfortably in the rolling hills of central Maryland, a muscular stone's throw from Baltimore and Washington D.C. The student body is largely suburban, middle-class, white; they come to us from public high schools, and like their peers nationwide, they are worried about getting jobs after graduation.

Nothing in their background has convinced them of the value of foreign language study, either as a complement to their career interest, or as a means of personal fulfillment. Though their number has dwindled steadily, there are the exceptional few, now scarcely a handful, who arrive wanting to major in a foreign language. Fewer still are those who are prepared to begin their college study at a level more advanced than the first year.

Despite this bleak picture, at Western Maryland things are not so bad. During the attack on college-wide requirements of the early seventies, we managed to retain ours for one year. Previously we had had a two-year

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requirement; the reduction left us wounded but with strong vital signs. Of course, following this erosion of our basic language courses, enrollments in advanced courses dropped off dramatically. By 1977-1978 we had learned to plan on cancellation of upper-level courses because of insufficient enrollment. Morale had sunk to a dangerous low; a pall of generalized anxiety seemed to hang like a raincloud over the department, now and then punctuated by showers of gallows humor. Something, it had become clear, had to be done.

In our department we offer majors in French, German, and Spanish. Those of us (the real number is two) who teach French decided to do a little investigating into the source of our weakening situation. What we found out was simple: students weren't majoring in French because the task of mastering a language in college seemed impossibly difficult when they had to start from scratch as freshmen. The gap between the elementary and intermediate sequences (originally designed to service a requirement, not to prepare for further study) and the upper-level "major" track was, it seemed to them, unbridgeable.

What we needed, then, was a method which would produce, in record time, a student who could read and understand, speak and write French easily enough to make a major attractive and less formidable. The Dartmouth Intensive Language Model seemed like the solution to our dilemma; the more we found out about it, the more we liked it. We realized quickly however, that to make our dream a reality, we would need a strategically designed plan of action. At our college curricular decisions are subject to faculty vote, and for all its attractions, an intensive language model

was hardly the sort of program our colleagues would support with hard cash.

We began by announcing our plans to our Dean. We explained coolly and clearly that, given our situation - inadequately prepared freshmen, lack of motivation - an intensive model was the best way to strengthen language study. To our delight he supported our efforts, seeing them as fully consistent with the mission of the college. He encouraged us to persevere and agreed to meet the expenses of a day-long consultancy with the director of an intensive French program at a nearby university. He paid our way to Dartmouth so that we could consult directly with John Rassias. Throughout the planning process we kept in touch with key members of our faculty, particularly those serving on our curriculum committee, letting them know what we were doing and, especially, why. When the proposal for the new program finally came to a vote after months of strategic planning and hours of meetings, it passed unanimously. Although it felt like a hard-won victory, the real work had not yet begun.

Our program proposed a three semester sequence of Intensive French courses to replace the traditional four semester sequence of elementary and intermediate French. The problem we faced glared up at us from the pages of the proposal: only French was to be taught intensively, and intensively was the only way French was to be taught. Given our one-year requirement which could easily be fulfilled in a traditional course in German or Spanish, who would take Intensive French which met three hours in master class, three hours in drill, and two hours in the laboratory? The preregistration figures were encouraging: more than 100 students had signed up for French, and we had planned the program for exactly that number.

These students were incoming freshmen who had registered by mail before coming to campus. When they arrived in September and realized that they could take German or Spanish to fulfill their language requirement, the drop-add slips began to pour in. By the end of the first month of classes, our enrollment had dropped from 100 to 67. By the end of the first year, we were down to 63, approximately half of the number we usually had in first-year French.

But something new had begun to happen. The forces which had produced the drastic decline in enrollments had also set into motion a process of natural selection favoring the more gifted and more motivated students. Those who stayed with us did so because they liked what we were doing, and they were learning French. When preregistration took place that spring, nearly 40% decided to continue French beyond the requirement (in past years that figure would have been 15%), and among those students nearly 75% have decided to major in French, either by itself or in combination with another field. What is most significant about this growing interest is that it has come in response to (among other things) our conscious decision to maintain rigorous standards of achievement in the face of increasingly poor secondary-level preparation. It seemed clear to us, then, that our students were choosing to continue in French because the goal of mastering the language was within reach, and they found this new confidence in their ability in our program.

The students themselves substantiate this assessment in their responses to the course evaluation forms we distribute periodically during the year. Those who have previously studied French (approximately 90% of the total) find, with no exceptions, that Intensive French provides, by far, a much more effective format for learning the language than did

their previous courses. This sample includes those students transferring from other post-secondary schools where language courses followed the traditional three-hour/three-credit structure. The students who take Intensive French, however, are not the only beneficiaries of the program. The Apprentice Teachers who conduct the drill sessions have all shown marked improvement in their use of the language as well. This strengthening of their skills has given them a fresh sense of commitment to language study and a feeling of solidarity and enthusiasm which is, in my experience, unique on our campus. The training workshop accomplishes much of this renewal. In the workshop, which is conducted for three days before the opening of classes in September, they are isolated from all other concerns, and they work exclusively on perfecting pedagogical techniques which they begin to practice just five days later. Both the social and intellectual intensity of the workshop setting facilitate a sense of identification among them. They are becoming part of a "staff" because of their own achievement. This feeling of accomplishment, translated directly and immediately into productive activity, represents our most powerful promotional tool. Seeing their apprentice teachers, hardly a year or two older than they, in front of the class gives the students a concrete goal which lies within their grasp and which ultimately has far more meaning than any advice their faculty advisor could provide.

Defined by enrollment figures alone, the program in Intensive French at Western Maryland College has succeeded modestly. Our situation is not ideal, and our institution has a distinct identity. Nevertheless we share many of the same concerns that confront comparable colleges, and we are plagued by many of the same problems. If Intensive French has begun to reverse the trend of dwindling enrollments which haunted us in the seventies,

it is because it gets the job done more efficiently than any other instructional model I have encountered, and in the process, it fosters a sense of shared commitment to a vital learning process.